

## Sibelius's 'silence'

A pre-concert talk for the Hallé given in the Bridgewater Hall in 2007



The definitive biography of Sibelius, by Erik Tawastsjerna, runs to 900 pages, yet the final 25 years of the composer's life take up only 14 pages of this massive book. That's more than a quarter of his life dealt with in less than one sixtieth part of it. What happened to Sibelius to cause what is often described as 'the silence'?

The photograph of Sibelius reproduced here, looking benign and happy, contrasts strongly with the usually stern and forbidding face we are used to. The only really characteristic element is the cigar in his left hand, although the glass of whisky in his right hand is missing. But this positive side of him was to some extent the public face, where, apart from being the grand figure of Finnish nationalism and Finnish music, he had the reputation of being sensitive and generous.

In private he was tormented : his diary entries reveal somebody with a terribly thin skin, ready to take offence at the slightest criticism, thrown into the depths of despair by what he thought was failing creativity, something of a hypochondriac, over-reliant on alcohol, and often monstrously egotistical. He was the victim of extreme mood swings : one day he would write in his diary that life was no longer worth living - he's been forgotten, he can no longer compose; a few days later the sun is shining, he's never worked so well in his life. On Monday the second and third movements of the Fifth Symphony are discarded; on Tuesday they're reinstated.

Composers are usually allowed to get away with this sort of behaviour : and one can forgive anything of a composer as great as Sibelius. But what is so distressing is that it was largely this intense self-doubt and self-criticism that was to make him give up composing. His personality made him what he was, but it also destroyed him creatively.

It would be a misinterpretation of his life simply to suggest that he reached a point where he found it no longer possible to compose, just as it would be difficult to say at what point he realised that he had become effectively silent : he continued to compose, or to try to compose, well into the 1930s, although the music would never be heard. This was in fact a gradual process, that had started many years before he wrote the final great works, two of which, the Seventh Symphony and *Tapiola* are in tonight's programme.

After the masterpiece of his middle period, the Fourth Symphony in 1911 eight years passed before the final completion of the Fifth, in 1919. There were of course works in between, including the tone poem the *Oceanides*, and tonight's *Luonnotar* - one of Sibelius's most extraordinary works; but the focal point of his creative life was the symphonies - they were what he wanted to be measured by. Having seemed to be at the height of his powers with the Fourth he had great difficulty in getting the Fifth right : one of his problems was that from 1914 onwards he was working on two symphonies simultaneously - much of the material for the Sixth comes from this time, and it's also clear that he had the Seventh in his mind long before the main period of its composition, in 1923 and 1924.

But there was more than one reason for the difficulties he was having. He'd never been well off, always tending to live beyond his means, and with the outbreak of the 1st World War contact with his German publisher became difficult; there was also not much demand for large-scale works. Occasional music was something that he'd always written from time to time - the *Valse Triste* is particularly famous, and it was particularly galling for him that he had sold the rights and earned no royalties from its many performances. Now, in order to make a living, it became a major occupation : Impromptus, Polonaises, Waltzes, Humoresques - from 1915 onwards you look through his work list and it has all the appearance of the music of a minor salon composer, with page after page of trifles, the symphonies emerging like great ships out of the mist.

There are just a few gems amongst all these pieces, but most of them are pretty inconsequential. Sibelius would occasionally arrange one of them for orchestra to include in the concerts that he regularly conducted - another means of income, although usually the fee would go on a splendid after-concert meal - but the poor reviews, which he read obsessively, would send him into another spiral of depression. Having steered clear of alcohol (and cigars) for many years after the major throat operation he'd undergone in 1908, he gradually found himself relying on both more and more. It may not initially have had any effect on his creativity, but it certainly contributed to a decline in his mental state.

Whatever the reason, the first performance of the Fifth Symphony which took place on Sibelius' 50th birthday in December 1915, was only a partial success, and Sibelius soon realised that he needed to revise it extensively. A second version was performed a year later, but still he wasn't satisfied, and it wasn't until 1919, a period of three years in which he wrote nothing else of any consequence, that the final version of the symphony was achieved. Of course the war years had hardly been conducive to composing; but it was to be another four years after this until the Sixth Symphony was finished, in 1923, again with no other major works appearing over that time.

But then things seemed to speed up, and 1924 saw the first performance of the long-planned Seventh Symphony (first performed as 'Fantasia Sinfonica'); 1925 the Incidental Music to *The Tempest* - incidental in name, but of major musical importance; and 1926 *Tapiola*. So that, to all appearances, Sibelius was back on track, having produced four masterly works in as many years, with an

ever-growing international reputation as the leading composer of his time, and with much to look forward to at the age of only 60. Instead there were more than 30 years of near silence ahead.

He still turned out occasional pieces, but at a considerably slower rate - with a much more secure income he had far less financial incentive to produce these trifles now, and to all appearances he was working hard on his Eighth Symphony. As indeed he was : first conceived as early as 1924, he began serious work on it in 1926, and in 1928 pronounced himself very pleased with what he'd written. In 1929 he'd finished the first draft of the work- in his head if not quite all of it on paper - and he promised the first performance to Koussevitsky and the Boston SO for the following season.

But the promise was broken, and each successive year brought more prevarication. He certainly continued to work at the Eighth - from the summer of 1933 there's a surviving invoice from his copyist for 23 pages of the first movement. And there is evidence that the complete work was bound in no less than seven volumes and on the shelves of Sibelius's library in 1938. But the more it was asked after - and almost every major conductor was anxious to give the première - the more Sibelius retreated into himself. A letter as late as 1943 speaks of his 'continuing and consuming interest' in the work. But at some time before the end of 1945 he burned the manuscript. After his death his wife said that she could not bear to watch the destruction of the symphony, along with many other manuscripts. 'I therefore do not know what he threw on to the fire', she said. 'But after this my husband became calmer and gradually lighter in mood. It was a happy time.'

Although the programme book for tonight speaks of 'the mystery of the Eighth Symphony' it's not really a mystery. It certainly existed, and it was certainly destroyed. But Sibelius didn't eradicate all the traces : recent research on his manuscripts in the Helsinki University Library has revealed that many of the sketches survive, and there's even been talk of reconstruction, although I suspect that the material - not nearly as comprehensive as the sketches for Elgar's Third Symphony, nor remotely as complete as Mahler's Tenth - would make any such reconstruction too hypothetical to be of real value.

We can't know exactly what happened to Sibelius to make him withdraw from the musical world : we certainly can't learn it from him, as his diary entries, already sporadic by 1926, stopped more or less completely in 1933. He withdrew from musical life in other ways - he'd been an international figure, but after a trip to Berlin in 1931 he never again left Finland, where, in spite of his silence and his retreat from public life, he remained a national treasure. Above all we can't know if his estimation of the Eighth Symphony was correct : the surviving sketches don't reveal a masterpiece, but his working methods were such that the same is true of the sketches of his other works. We have to be content with the seven symphonies that we know.